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**EXTRADITED COLOMBIAN HEROIN KINGPIN
PLEADS GUILTY IN FEDERAL COURT**

DAVID N. KELLEY, the United States Attorney for the Southern District of New York, announced today the guilty plea of RAMIRO LOPEZ-IMITOLA, the head of a heroin trafficking organization based in Cucuta, Colombia and Caracas, Venezuela (the "Organization") responsible for importing thousands of kilograms of heroin, worth an estimated \$200 million, into the United States since 1997. At present, 17 members of the Organization have been arrested, and more than 50 kilograms of heroin seized. LOPEZ-IMITOLA was formally extradited from Colombia on February 26, 2004, and pleaded guilty earlier today before United States District Judge ROBERT P. PATTERSON. A sentencing hearing is scheduled for May 2, 2005.

The charges were the result of a joint investigation involving cooperation between the Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Force ("OCDETF"), the Drug Enforcement Administration ("DEA"), Bureau of Immigration and Customs

Enforcement ("BICE"), the New York City Police Department ("NYPD"), and the New York State Police, together with the Venezuelan Judicial Police, the Colombian National Police, the Miami Beach Police Department and the Coral Gables Police Department.

According to a two-count Indictment and the formal request for extradition (the "Extradition Package"), as well as representations by the Government during the plea proceeding, LOPEZ-IMITOLA used human couriers recruited in both Venezuela and the United States to smuggle heroin into the United States from Venezuela by either ingesting pellets of heroin or carrying suitcases with heroin hidden in the lining. LOPEZ-IMITOLA would send as many as 15 couriers on a single flight from Venezuela to Miami, each of whom had ingested 700 grams to more than a kilogram of heroin. The heroin was imported into Venezuela from Colombia, and then transported by the couriers to various locations in the United States. To ensure that these couriers would not attempt to steal from the Organization or later cooperate against members of the Organization, LOPEZ-IMITOLA and other members of the Organization used torture and intimidation, the Indictment and Extradition Package alleged. For example, according to the Indictment, LOPEZ-IMITOLA or one of his representatives would meet with the couriers at the time they were recruited and compel them to provide the Organization with information regarding the couriers' families, with the threat

that harm would come to them and their families if they did not comply with the directives of the Organization. Similarly, when LOPEZ-IMITOLA believed that one of the couriers stole approximately \$100,000 of the proceeds from the sale of the Organization's heroin, the courier and his boyfriend were brutally tortured by the defendant in Venezuela. Other couriers were told of this by senior members of the Organization to instill fear and to ensure their compliance with the orders of the Organization, the Indictment and Extradition Package alleged.

LOPEZ-IMITOLA would send the couriers to the United States in first class so as to avoid attention from authorities. Although the couriers would enter the United States in different cities, they would primarily travel to Manhattan, where they would meet with other members of the Organization in hotels where they would deliver the heroin and receive money for the Organization. They would then return to Venezuela with millions of dollars which would then be delivered to LOPEZ-IMITOLA or one of his representatives.

In order to permit the couriers to travel to the United States, LOPEZ-IMITOLA illegally obtained over 100 United States travel visas by bribing employees at the United States Embassy in Caracas, Venezuela. Further, LOPEZ-IMITOLA and members of the Organization paid law enforcement officers who worked at the Simon Bolivar International Airport in Caracas, Venezuela,

approximately \$1,500 to \$2,000 for every courier for each trip made on behalf of the Organization. In return, the law enforcement officers would make sure that the couriers would clear through any security checks at the airport, and intercede if any other law enforcement officer detained one of the couriers.

According to the Extradition Package, Indictment, and filings in the case, at least one of the couriers who ingested heroin died in Miami of a heroin overdose after one of the pellets that he had ingested burst open. LOPEZ-IMITOLA directed others in the Organization cut open the corpse and retrieve the heroin from the courier's body in return for thousands of dollars, and when they refused to do so, directed them to bring the body to individuals that LOPEZ-IMITOLA knew in Florida who specialized in cutting open the bodies of couriers who died of overdoses. The Organization members refused, and dumped the body (which still contained 88 pellets of heroin) into Biscayne Bay, Miami Beach, Florida, where it was recovered by the Miami Beach Police Department.

According to the Extradition Package, LOPEZ-IMITOLA was arrested by the Colombian National Police near Cucuta, Colombia, pursuant to a provisional arrest warrant on April 4, 2003. At the time of his arrest, LOPEZ-IMITOLA admitted to his conduct and essentially referred to himself as the Pablo Escobar of heroin

trafficking.

LOPEZ-IMITOLA faces a maximum sentence of life in prison and a mandatory minimum sentence of 10 years in prison. The Indictment also seeks forfeiture from LOPEZ-IMITOLA of \$200 million dollars, based on his importation of approximately 2000 kilograms of heroin into the United States.

Mr. KELLEY praised the cooperative investigative efforts of the DEA, BICE, OCDETF, the NYPD, the New York State Police, the Miami Beach Police Department, the Coral Gables Police Department, the Colombian National Police, and the Venezuelan Judicial Police.

Assistant United States Attorneys NEIL M. BAROFSKY and MARC P. BERGER are in charge of the prosecution.

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